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Life as Ceremonial

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LIFE AS CEREMONIAL*

THE title of my talk to you to-day was given to me, chosen for me, possibly because the subject is the one in which I have specialised, the one in which I find the easiest mode of expression. For each one of us must find the road by which the Self can manifest, choosing the subject according to the bent of his mind and the type of his temperament. But if I might have chosen the title for myself I would have changed only one letter and instead of speaking on "Life as Ceremonial" I would have said "*Life is Ceremonial*." For that is what life appears to me, one great gorgeous ceremonial in which, with attention to every smallest detail, one endeavours to carry out the great Plan, the Plan conceived by the Logos when He came forth into manifestation, creating matter that it might be vivified and informed with His Life and become a veritable manifestation of Himself. And so into matter He

* A lecture delivered at the European Federation of the Theosophical Society held at Vienna, July, 1923.

breathed the Divine Spark, shielded and encased It, that eventually It might shine through more gloriously in that to which It had given Life.

The Great Plan is the Reality towards which we are all groping, feebly, blindly, constantly losing our way, and yet led by the Light which shines within each one of us, which dimly we see and follow. If we would take part in the carrying out of that Great Plan, we must strive for some understanding of it; and thither surely our studies in the Divine Wisdom will lead us until at long last we learn to co-operate with the Supreme Will in evolution—the evolution of that matter in which the Self is encased, that matter through which and by which we learn, through which and by which we shall come to complete self-consciousness. For here is the real Crucifixion, the great Sacrifice—the *sacro facio*—in which we lay ourselves on the Altar and make all holy by the utter giving of ourselves in service, service to all that lives, in all of which is the Divine Life of the Logos, who has manifested Himself in this world of matter, that each tiniest atom may know itself as Divine, Eternal. And the manner of our giving? That is for each one of us—the manifested Divine spark—to determine. For myself

I choose the way of ceremonial, for to me that is the easiest mode of expression, the easiest method of work, and I believe strongly in the conservation of energy. Each one of us has only a certain amount of energy, of strength, and it behoves us to use that power to the best of our ability and to use any and every means available to attain our end, the making of our personality, of our lower bodies, the perfect expression of the Divine within us. Therefore I choose ceremonial as the easiest way, the way of least resistance, the way by which all my bodies are attuned to like vibrations that so there may be no obstacle to the passage through the encasing sheaths of matter, and the Divine Life may shine through, glorious and complete, proving that Spirit and Matter are but the two poles of the one great glorious Reality, the manifestation of the Great Eternal Life.

More than once our great Leaders have spoken to us of the important part that ceremonial will play in the coming new civilisation, and so, partly for that reason but also because I love the order, the rhythm, the dignity of ceremonial, I have set myself to study it, to find out the uses, the value, the purposes of it, and how I may adapt it to my daily life. The word ceremonial comes to us through the

French from the Latin *kaeremonia*, from the root *kar*, meaning to act or to do ; that is, the translation into action of our thoughts, of our ideals, of the Self within us. That surely is our work as Theosophists. Yet so often I hear from members of the Theosophical Society : " But I do not like ceremonial, I like life to be plain and simple." Yes, but we cannot get away from ceremonial. In this wonderful gathering of members from all over Europe, has there not been a very elaborate and carefully thought-out ceremonial, to make of this Congress a settled plan of action, that step by step shall lead the various units to realise the greatness of the Plan, to make plain to them the reality of the brotherhood, that however diverse the nationality or the individuality, is yet manifest in the common aim, the common goal, the common service ? Have not the members of the various committees worked hard and faithfully that the material comforts of the visitors may be assured, that the various branches of our organisation may be adequately represented, that the spiritual needs of all may be satisfied ? Yet in all this, have they not only followed the ways of the Great Hierarchy Itself, where there is a great and wondrous ceremonial, in which Each holds His own place

and carries out the particular work of His own office, working according to the Great Plan and obedient to the wishes of the Logos? In the Theosophical Society there is a ceremony of admission, sometimes omitted, but, when practised, very distinctly a ceremony, worked according to an arranged plan. Even in the Order of the Star in the East,* least ceremonious of Orders, there is a ceremony of meditation, for one deliberately orders the attitude of body, emotions and mind before getting into touch with the Higher Self; there is an ordered harmony, a very deliberate taking hold of every part of one's being. In how many households, Catholic, Anglican, Non-conformist, is not the taking of food, the commonest action of our daily life, transformed into a ceremony, because it is prefaced by a grace and concluded by a set form of thanks, that our physical bodies, composed of matter and nourished by matter, may, in a world of matter, become competent vehicles for the living soul within and fit to carry out the work of the Self? Always religion has expressed itself in ceremonial, more or less elaborate according to nationality and temperament; always the ideals of the people have shown themselves in the

* Since disbanded.

common acts of daily life; always religion has been the moving spirit and the life of a Nation; and woe betide that nation that shuts out religion, that substitutes materialism for the Spirit that gives the Life. For the end is Death, a mere existence of the form, which in time must surely perish without the life which alone makes the form possible. For the form is merely an expression of life and once the life is withdrawn, the form must disintegrate and cease to be. Truly the form in itself and without the ensouling life within may be unimportant, but as a visible expression of that which it represents, the correctness of a form is essential. For us Theosophists, the form is important, for, in a world of matter, only by the form can we manifest the Divine Life that is within us. For the whole purpose of evolution is unity with the Divine, the desire to express the unity that lies behind diversity, and this great truth—that we are one with the Divine Life—Plotinus realised when, almost in his last words, he stated that he would bear the Divine within him to the Divine in the Universe. So must we thus build the form that it shall truly be the expression of the Self. Here ceremonial comes to our aid and teaches us how to build the form with the least expenditure of energy; for the ceremonialist

makes use of any and every means to this end that he may not unnecessarily waste his strength. Not only does he use all external means, but quite consciously and deliberately he makes use of the unseen forces in the Universe, those which we sometimes call angelic forces, as well as the Elemental Kingdoms.

Now I am going to specialise on one form of ceremonial, that which I know best, and in which I, the real me, find the easiest mode of expression. I speak of Masonry, that great and wonderful exposition of Truth, which explains the mysteries of Life and Death; which makes plain the great teaching and plan of evolution; which leads man from darkness to Light; which makes him know himself as Divine, learning, suffering, giving in uttermost service, that in the end darkness may be conquered and the Light may shine forth. That light is made visible through the ceremonies of Masonry, and is there seen glorious, triumphant, making the Path visible to all, with helping, loving hands outstretched all the way that none may fail to reach the goal. There is no lesson that Masonry cannot teach, no difficulty, no problem that Masonry cannot solve, for to the weakest and to the strongest, its training is complete and thorough; it trains physical body, emotions and

mind until they become perfect expressions of the Self, each working to its highest capacity, each utterly responsive to the Will of the Divine.

The training is very gradual, a slow and careful quickening of the vibrations in the matter of which our bodies are composed. It is a truism that the greatest characteristic of matter is inertia. We recognise in Masonry that the Higher Triad of Spirit works through the lower quaternary of physical body, emotional body, lower and higher mental bodies, and so we set ourselves to make of that lower quaternary an expression of the Self and so to train and purify it, that by quickening the vibrations of that lower quaternary, it may come to the highest possible power of expression. The normal rate of vibration in matter is very slow, but consider the manner of quickening that rate. An action is performed and the imposition of the Will of the man that has caused that action results in the quickening of the rate of vibration in the physical body; an emotion is carefully fostered in the astral body and the same thing happens to the matter of which that body is composed; a thought is carefully considered and again the rate of vibration is increased in the matter of the

mental body. At each of our Masonic meetings, at each ceremony, we deliberately quicken slightly the normal rate of vibration by the impress of the Will and beyond that, the power of the Self ; until gradually by continual repetitions this habit of a quicker rate is set up, and so, as the worn-out particles of matter are thrown aside we take in those that can respond to the higher rate at which our bodies are now vibrating. Thus, by these continually repeated efforts at ceremony after ceremony, we build our bodies of finer and finer matter, until at last each body will be composed of the seventh sub-plane of its own type of matter, perfectly responsive to the Will of the Self, its evolution completed, the outpouring of the Logos manifested in full glory. That is our goal, that towards which we aim, the accomplishment to which we have set our hands.

The means ? Of some I may not speak, but of some of our methods of work I will tell you. The first lesson we learn is that when we enter the Temple to do our work as Masons we must leave our difficult personalities outside and work in harmony with our brothers, meeting in the common interest and on the common ground of Masonry ; for in Masonic ceremonial we are trying to manifest our ideals through the

common language of symbols instead of through the various languages of nations. For the great symbols are universal in their form, universal in their application, and neither language, nation nor sex can be any bar to their understanding and to their expression. In them can be shown forth the thoughts of all, the aspirations of all, and so, working together to express our ideals through the impersonal, universal language of symbols we learn in Masonry our first lesson, the reality and not merely the intellectual or emotional concept of Brotherhood, the Oneness, the Unity of Humanity, in the lessons to be learned, in its hopes, in its aims.

The next lesson we learn is the value of rhythmic, concerted action. The value of rhythm in action is now beginning to be generally recognised, as may be seen by the rapid spread of the teaching of eurhythmics in our schools. Listening to music played to them the children learn to feel the joy or the sorrow in that music, to understand the thought expressed in sound, and then to translate that understanding of feeling and thought into movements and actions of the physical body. So the physical, astral and mental bodies are brought into harmony and work in unity, all striving to express the same idea, and so

setting up rhythmic vibrations in all three bodies. That is the first value of rhythmic action. Secondly, in ceremonial we learn the value of concerted action combined with rhythm, where a large body of people, with understanding of the work they are doing, move, feel and think alike, using a symbol or a set form of words and actions to express an idea. No one who has been present at a Masonic ceremony where each member knows and understands what is behind the form of the ceremony can be insensible of the effect produced upon the candidate; it is not only that he is conscious of the earnestness and sincerity of those around him, but you will find if you question him afterwards, that he received definite impressions of that which lay behind speech and actions. So the very real power of thought, in which we all believe, is made manifest in ceremonial by the unity of thought of a large number of people being translated into unity of action and so gaining, with comparatively slight individual effort, a strength and a force that one single person, however strong in concentration, can rarely attain. The strength of one is so small, the combined strength of many so great. There is so much work to be done that we must all use our powers in the

wisest manner, and with as little expenditure of our strength as possible. In this we are only following the example of the Masters Themselves, Whose energy and strength, great though they may appear to us, yet have their limitations, and so when some great work is to be accomplished, They combine and work together. And where They lead, shall we not follow?

Thirdly, rhythmic concerted action gives the power of vision and that vision is necessary if we would carry out that which we have so often been told, that we must see big, think big and act big. For it is by the power of that wonderful vision that we establish the perfect harmonic vibrations of all our bodies which make it possible for the Light to shine through without obstacle, irradiating all the dark and obscure places, so that the mind of man, freed from the maya of illusion, sees the great Realities, and knows the pairs of opposites as one in essence, though two in manifestation. Thus shall be fulfilled the great purpose of the Logos, to vivify matter by the sacrifice of the Spirit and thus show Spirit and Matter as one by the power of the Centre.

Another lesson that we learn in Masonry is to know something of our own nature, to

understand the nature of the material through which the Self has to work. The Mason should begin his studies by a knowledge of himself and so learn to know matter in all its forms, to discover the laws that govern its various phases, the forces that act in it, its response to stimuli from without, its reactions, the systole and diastole as the Life informs or withdraws from the matter it uses. And the tools put into his hands with which to work on this matter are all important, beginning with the simplest and most elementary, one by one adding others, the whole wonderfully progressive in their action, fitting the different stages of the work. It is interesting to note how the tools of the Mason, the builder, have been used in all ages, even the most remote, in a symbolical sense, as a guide and help for our daily life. In ancient China there was a great mystic religion in which the priests wore, as do our Modern Masons, aprons of skin and, dependent from a chain round the neck, a jewel denoting and symbolical of the office held.

In the *Book of History*, the oldest of the Chinese classics, which deals with a period ranging from the twenty-fourth to the seventh century B.C., there are many allusions to the symbolism of the tools used by Masons. In

another famous Chinese classic, *The Great Learning*, about 500 B.C., there is an allusion to acting towards others as we would wish them to act towards us; and the writer adds: "This is called the principle of acting on the square."

Again in the writings of the great Chinese philosopher, Mencius, about 300 B.C., it is taught that men should apply the square and compasses figuratively to their lives, and the marking-line also, if they would keep within the bounds of honour and virtue and live upright and cleanly. We find this very clear statement in Book VI of his philosophy: "A Master-Mason, in teaching his apprentices, makes use of the compasses and the square. Ye who are engaged in the pursuit of Wisdom must also make use of the compasses and square." In the Middle Ages also the tools of the Mason were used symbolically; for example, in rebuilding in 1830 a very ancient bridge, called Baal's Bridge, near Limerick in Ireland, an old brass square, much corroded, was found under the foundations; and on its two surfaces was found this inscription, together with the date 1517: "I will strive to live with love and care, upon the level by the square." The rule or measure, was called in ancient Egypt "that

which is straight," and was frequently used as a symbol of the Goddess Maat, Goddess of Truth. You all remember the Hall of Judgment in which the soul of the deceased was led before Osiris, and the heart was laid in the scales to be weighed by Tehuti against that feather which also symbolises Maat. And beside the scales stood the Beast of Amenti, the Devourer of the Unjustified, ready to do his dread duty if the balance were not equal. I could give many more examples but these will suffice for the moment. All these tools and many others are placed before the Mason for his use and he is taught their symbolical application in all the difficulties and circumstances of his daily life. Also we learn obedience to the Great Law which is symbolised by the Master of the Lodge who stands for Justice and whose commands we must obey.

There are so many other things we learn also in Masonry: self-control, restraint, gentleness, consideration for others, poise and balance, the most exquisite courtesy, obedience to and respect for authority; in fact, all that goes to make a gentleman in the best and highest sense of the word. If we could carry into our daily life these virtues and principles that we practise habitually in our Masonic Temples, the world

would soon be a very different place, and would be more fit to receive the Great Teacher Whom we await so eagerly and for Whose Coming we long. And yet to some extent, small at present because we are so slow to learn and the rude material of our natures needs so many heavy blows to knock it into shape, yet to some extent, the lessons learnt in our Temples bear fruit, and in our daily contact with our fellow-creatures we instinctively extend towards them the courtesy and gentleness we use in our ceremonies; the habit of "acting upon the square" becomes an integral part of us, and the effort to make words and actions beautiful and harmonious shows itself in the common dealings of daily life. Sometimes I picture to myself the world as it might be if we lived our lives as they are lived during the brief hours of our ceremonies, and I realise that if I dream this wonderful dream sufficiently vividly and often enough, it will in very truth become a reality. For I believe in dreaming. It is the dreamers who are the real world-builders. For the dreams of the Mystic are woven and translated into action by the Occultist, the inspiration of the artist is shown in colour, in sound and in form, that all men may see and know the Beautiful; out of the

dreams of the compassionate are born the acts of love, of service and of brotherhood, and from the vision of the Eternal comes the City Beautiful, where every stone is polished, perfect in shape and form to make flawless the buildings fashioned in love and selfless service.

This is my dream. I see a wondrous Temple, shining and spotless, perfect in all its parts, more beautiful than any building conceived by the mind of man, vaster than any built by the hand of man, for it contains all humanity ; and it reaches from North to South, and from East to West, from the highest point of heaven to the lowest depths of despair and misery and hell, for none is shut out of that great Temple. Ranged in orderly array they stand, row upon row in serried ranks, elder and younger, wise and ignorant, united by the common bond of humanity, conscious of the brotherhood of common need and common service, made one in the bond of kinship and of love. As they stand, there pass before them in gorgeous ceremonial, arrayed in splendour of colour and glittering flashes of light, in slow and stately procession, the Great Ones Who are in charge of this Temple. Slowly They pass, walking from one point to another, until they have described a double square, that symbol which in the ancient

hieroglyphs of Egypt represented Truth, and which now we know as the double cube, symbol of the Universe ; then, one by one Each passes to His appointed place and we find the principal officers forming the Great Triangle of Spirit within that great square. And of those Three, there is One Who rules and presides, and over His Head shines the Star and around Him is a great glory of Light. By right of uttermost service is He in that chair, for He that is greatest is He that serveth best. Only dimly can I perceive what follows, but I am conscious of the perfect and glorious ceremonial in which Each plays His part. Then the Master speaks. To each one of us listening there it seems that He speaks individually, for He talks to us out of the knowledge gained from His own experience ; He too has trodden the path on which we now walk, He too has known the bitter failures and humiliations, the selfishness, the laziness, the lack of effort, the resultant suffering, until at last the lesson is learned and, stumbling sometimes, falling sometimes, but each time rising again to greater effort, the path of Service has been trodden ; and freedom from re-birth has been won through the knowledge that perfect freedom is only found in perfect service. Again with stately ceremonial

my dream comes to an end and the Great Ones pass from my vision, leaving peace and blessing in Their passing. The teaching given, the truths taught through the symbolism of that ceremonial remain with me, the more vivid that I have seen them thus displayed in action, presented to me in drama and not merely as an intellectual concept. Taking up again my daily life full of perplexities, full of constant irritations, misunderstandings, difficulties of all kinds, that vision shines out strongly before me and I realise that it is opposition to the Law that makes the difficulties; that if I will but obey the Law of Service fully and completely, I shall be in harmony with all that lives.

For Service is the greatest lesson of all that we learn in our Temples. How beautifully that is put by our English poet Rudyard Kipling, himself a Mason :

“ Lift ye the stone or cleave the wood to
 make a path more fair or flat,
 Lo, it is black already with blood some son
 of Martha spilled for that.
 Not as a ladder from Earth to Heaven, not
 as an altar to any creed,
 But simple Service simply given, to their own
 kind in their common need.”

Even in our most elaborate ceremonial "simple service simply given" is a marked characteristic of our work. An officer, for instance, wants to get rid of something he has been using and, occupied with what is in front of him, stretches out his hands behind him and immediately several hands are outstretched to receive the article, whatever it may be. It is the simplicity of the service in ceremonial that is so wonderful. Quite lately I was working in a Masonic Lodge which practises what is I suppose the most elaborate ceremonial of any Lodge in our Order; but so perfectly was it performed that a very distinguished visitor who was present said to me afterwards: "What beautiful working; it was all so simple." Take for example your own Kreisler, that greatest of artists, who was born in Austria and belongs to you but who is also one of the great gifts given to the world and in whom we all claim a share. Listen to his wonderful playing, and the most intricate and difficult music appears simple because of his consummate ease in playing. And yet what care and thought and work have gone to achieve that simplicity of result, that ease of technique; what complete mastery there is of the Man over his vehicles, so that listening to him one forgets the marvel

of technique in the beauty of the thoughts and feelings shown to us in perfect sound. As the artist has expressed himself in music, so the ceremonialist expresses himself in action, and "simple service simply given" is as natural to him as the manner in which Kreisler moves his fingers on the strings of his violin.

And these little acts of service become instinctive with us who are trained by ceremonial, so that they become a part of us and are carried into practice in our work in the outside world, so that service becomes a recognised part of human life; and not until service, absolute and complete, is the very mainspring of our being, is our work completed.

Every bit of our training in ceremonial teaches us how to serve, teaches us to be quick to see the need of another and instant to respond to that need; to that end body, emotions and mind are trained and controlled and the intuition awakened by continual practice, by strict discipline and obedience; until by repeated effort alone every atom of our vehicles becomes responsive to the Will of the controlling Self. So out of my dream I build my life among my Brothers, knowing that life is the action by which the spirit makes itself manifest, and knowing also

that unless I can bring into action in my daily life the lessons learned in the Temple, my Masonry is but a dead thing and its ceremonial an empty form. But the habits of right thought and right action get built into me and made a part of me by the constant practice of ceremonial, and slowly but surely the habit of living in the world of ideals and translating them into action extends from the limited hours of those ceremonies into the whole of life; and gradually the grosser particles of matter that compose my bodies will be replaced by those finer atoms which alone can respond to the quickened vibrations imposed by the Will of the Self as it gains mastery and control over its vehicles.

This then is what ceremonial does for me; it teaches me obedience to Law; it trains me in gradual evolution; it puts me in touch with the guiding spirit of Life; it gives me the inspiration of the Self which alone makes these vehicles or sheaths of matter of value; it leads me from the unreal to the real and shows me that by the knowledge and control of matter—that in which we work and move and have our being—the Self can become more glorious, more potential, absolutely Lord of all Planes. In short, it teaches me that I am in

very truth the Master of my Fate, that I am the Captain of my Soul. For to the ceremonialist who is also a Mason it is in our Temples that we learn those God-like qualities which must characterise and distinguish each one of us before our evolution is finished, and not until we possess these can the wheel of re-birth cease to turn for us. When we have learned that great lesson of service to all then indeed our reward shall be great—the greatest reward of all—the reward of ever greater service in His holy Temple, that great Temple of perfected Humanity which has been conceived and carried out to glorious completion by the Logos, the Great Architect of the Universe. The temples in which we work here on earth and where we learn these great lessons are but faint reflections of that great glorious Temple of Humanity in which each stone, wrought by love and almost incredible sacrifice, is without flaw, perfect in shape, glorious in beauty. That Temple is the visible creation of the Great Architect of the Universe, the perfected Plan of the Logos Who conceived the great truth of Evolution, Who manifested Himself that all might partake of His glory, created man that he might become God, out of His own super-abounding Life gave Life, that each

manifestation of Himself might become as Himself, that through Service man might learn the lesson of Eternal Love, that Love which is the truest manifestation of the Divine, that which is Divinity itself, the in-breathing and the out-breathing, the Life of the Logos.

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